

This extract is taken from <https://www.theickabog.com/the-trial/>

Chapter 23 The Trial

I'm sure you haven't forgotten those three brave soldiers locked up in the dungeons, who'd refused to believe in either the Ickabog or in Nobby Buttons.

Well, Spittleworth hadn't forgotten them either. He'd been trying to think up ways to get rid of them, without being blamed for it, ever since the night he'd imprisoned them. His latest idea was to feed them poison in their soup, and pretend they'd died of natural causes. He was still trying to decide on the best poison to use, when some of the soldiers' relatives turned up at the palace gates, demanding to speak to the king. Even worse, Lady Eslanda was with them, and Spittleworth had the sneaking suspicion she'd arranged the whole thing.

Instead of taking them to the king, Spittleworth had the group shown into his splendid new Chief Advisor's office, where he invited them politely to sit down.

'We want to know when our boys are going to stand trial,' said Private Ogden's brother, who was a pig farmer from just outside Baronstown.

'You've had them locked up for months now,' said the mother of Private Wagstaff, who was a barmaid in a Jeroboam tavern.

'And we'd all like to know what they're charged with,' said Lady Eslanda.

'They're charged with treason,' said Spittleworth, wafting his scented handkerchief under his nose, with his eyes on the pig farmer. The man was perfectly clean, but Spittleworth meant to make him feel small, and I'm sorry to say he succeeded.

'Treason?' repeated Mrs Wagstaff in astonishment. 'Why, you won't find more loyal subjects of the king anywhere in the land than those three!'

Spittleworth's crafty eyes moved between the worried relatives, who so clearly loved their brothers and sons very deeply, and Lady Eslanda, whose face was so anxious, and a brilliant idea flashed into his brain like a lightning strike. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before! He didn't need to poison the soldiers at all! What he needed was to ruin their reputations.

'Your men will be put on trial tomorrow,' he said, getting to his feet. 'The trial will take place in the largest square in Chouxville, because I want as many people as possible to hear what they have to say. Good day to you, ladies and gentlemen.'

And with a smirk and a bow, Spittleworth left the astonished relatives and proceeded down into the dungeons.

The three soldiers were a lot thinner than the last time he'd seen them, and as they hadn't been able to shave or keep very clean, they made a miserable picture.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' said Spittleworth briskly, while the drunken warder snoozed in a corner. 'Good news! You're to stand trial tomorrow.'

'And what exactly are we charged with?' asked Captain Goodfellow suspiciously.

'We've been through this already, Goodfellow,' said Spittleworth. 'You saw the monster on the marsh, and ran away instead of staying to protect your king. You then claimed the monster isn't real, to cover up your own cowardice. That's treason.'

'It's a filthy lie,' said Goodfellow, in a low voice. 'Do what you like to me, Spittleworth, but I'll tell the truth.'

The other two soldiers, Ogden and Wagstaff, nodded their agreement with the captain.

'You might not care what I do to *you*,' said Spittleworth, smiling, 'but what about your families? It would be awful, wouldn't it, Wagstaff, if that barmaid mother of yours slipped on her way down into the cellar, and cracked open her skull? Or, Ogden, if your pig-farming brother accidentally stabbed himself with his own scythe, and got eaten by his own pigs? Or,' whispered Spittleworth, moving closer to the bars, and staring into Goodfellow's eyes, 'if Lady Eslanda were to have a riding accident, and break her slender neck.'

You see, Spittleworth believed that Lady Eslanda was Captain Goodfellow's lover. It would never occur to him that a woman might try and protect a man to whom she'd never even spoken.

Captain Goodfellow wondered why on earth Lord Spittleworth was threatening him with the death of Lady Eslanda. True, he thought her the loveliest woman in the kingdom, but he'd always kept that to himself, because cheesemakers' sons didn't marry ladies of the court.

'What has Lady Eslanda to do with me?' he asked.

'Don't pretend, Goodfellow,' snapped the Chief Advisor. 'I've seen her blushes when your name is mentioned. Do you think me a fool? She has been doing all that she can to protect you and, I must admit, it is down to her that you're still alive. However, it is the Lady Eslanda who'll pay the price if you tell any truth but mine tomorrow. She saved your life, Goodfellow: will you sacrifice hers?'

Goodfellow was speechless with shock. The idea that Lady Eslanda was in love with him was so marvellous that it almost eclipsed Spittleworth's threats. Then the captain realised that, in order to save Eslanda's life, he would have to publicly confess to treason the next day, which would surely kill her love for him stone-dead.

From the way the colour had drained out of the three men's faces, Spittleworth could see that his threats had done the trick.

'Take courage, gentlemen,' he said. 'I'm sure no awful accidents will happen to your loved ones, as long as you tell the truth tomorrow...'

So notices were pinned up all over the capital announcing the trial, and the following day, an enormous crowd packed itself into the largest square in Chouxville. Each of the three brave soldiers took it in turns to stand on a wooden platform, while their friends and families watched, and one by one they confessed that they'd met the Ickabog on the marsh, and had run away like cowards instead of defending the king.

The crowd booed the soldiers so loudly that it was hard to hear what the judge (Lord Spittleworth) was saying. However, all the time Spittleworth was reading out the sentence - life imprisonment in the palace dungeons - Captain Goodfellow stared directly into the eyes of Lady Eslanda, who sat watching, high in the stands, with the other ladies of the court. Sometimes, two people can tell each other more with a look than others could tell each other with a lifetime of words. I will not tell you everything that Lady Eslanda and Captain Goodfellow said with their eyes, but she knew, now, that the captain returned her feelings, and he learnt, even though he was going to prison for the rest of his life, that Lady Eslanda knew he was innocent.

